

BAITING FOR BIG GAME

Editor's note: This is the third installment of what we hope to include as a regular feature in North Dakota OUTDOORS – a column that offers insight into current issues or events that affect the state's natural resources or associated recreation. The Game and Fish Department deals with such issues on a regular basis, and receives sincere, passionate input "From Both Sides." OUTDOORS presents those points of view and opinions as a way to give readers a broad perspective.

Hunters and game management agencies have long debated the practice of baiting as a technique to attract animals for hunting purposes. The use of bait, whether it's carrion to attract furbearers to a trap, doughnuts to attract bears to an opening in the forest, or garden produce or grain piles to lure deer or elk close to a tree stand, is a traditional hunting practice in some states, while it's not allowed in others.

All across North America, baiting of waterfowl and other migratory birds is illegal, and has been since the early 1900s. This is a federal law in the United States, while states have discretion on whether to allow baiting of resident animals. In North Dakota, baiting is legal for hunting other species besides migratory birds, except on national wildlife refuges and other U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service lands.

But that might change. The North Dakota Game and Fish Department has assigned an internal work group to look at the issues mentioned here, and is developing plans to prohibit baiting on all state wildlife management areas starting this fall. Department representatives also solicited preliminary input on baiting at spring 2003 Game and Fish Advisory Board meetings, and this topic will likely be part of the agenda at fall 2003 meetings as well. Department officials hope to get a better understanding of how many people actually practice baiting, and some of the potential risks posed by baiting.

For this discussion, it is important to distinguish between "baiting" and "feeding." Baiting is a deliberate placement of food – which includes manipulation of crops for migratory birds – for attracting or habituating animals to a specific location for the purpose of hunting. Feeding is placement of food to attract animals to view them, or simply providing food to help certain animals survive during winter. Feeding is also used by Game and Fish, under special circumstances, to intercept or short-stop deer that are eating livestock feed supplies.

The functional difference between baiting and feeding is irrelevant because both unnaturally draw animals into close proximity.

Many people feed wildlife. The most common practice is backyard bird feeding. Rural residents and members of sportsmen's clubs often put out grain or

hay to give deer or pheasants a little extra help during winter. The Game and Fish Department even has feeders on a few of its wildlife management areas. Other wildlife feeding, such as deer attracted to hay or grain meant for livestock, is unintended.

Intended or not, feeding draws animals to places and in numbers that would not typically occur otherwise. While Game and Fish does not have specific North Dakota data, it is likely that instances of feeding greatly outnumber those of baiting.

Biologists for state and provincial wildlife agencies are reviewing wildlife feeding and baiting for big game hunting, because baiting and feeding are widely recognized as factors that increase the potential for spread of diseases between animals.

For example, if one or more animals harbor an infectious agent, transmission to uninfected individuals is facilitated by the increased frequency of contact that occurs when animals are gathered around a bait site. The Southeastern Cooperative Wildlife Disease Study group, on more than one occasion, identified use of bait during hunting as a significant contributing factor in a disease problem involving wild big game.

Diseases of particular concern are tuberculosis, brucellosis, and possibly chronic wasting disease. It is CWD, a fatal malady of deer and elk that has not yet been detected in North Dakota, that has elevated the concern over baiting and feeding. In 1999, 18 states prohibited use of bait for hunting big game. Currently, 24 states and six provinces do not allow baiting for hunting big game (not including bears), and 10 states and two provinces restrict baiting to some degree.

While disease concerns are primary considerations, they are not the only concerns surrounding baiting. Ethics, especially, is related to this discussion. If potential spread of disease was not a problem, ethics would still generate debate. And it's not a black-and-white debate, either.

What's considered moral and ethical hunting behavior in one state is illegal in others. For example, some southern states allow deer hunters to use dogs to locate and chase deer. This practice is generally prohibited in northern states, due in part to public opinion that use of dogs for hunting deer falls outside the boundaries of fair chase.

Ethics debates often involve apparent inconsistencies. In Minnesota, for instance, hunters can bait bears, but not deer. On the other hand, bear hunting in deep woods is difficult enough even with baiting, and success rates would be extremely low without baiting. Deer hunters are successful enough without baiting.

Wildlife baiting in North Dakota is a worthwhile discussion based on ethics alone. Add the prospect that baiting increases the likelihood of disease transmission in wildlife populations, and science joins ethics as

